

The Psalter & Commentary

Medieval Devotional Texts for Prayer,

Meditation, and Study

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Moses with the Tablets of the Law
Commentary on the Ten Commandments
Netherlands, ca 1480 (frontispiece)
On loan from Houston Public Library
Houston Metropolitan Research Center
Special Collections Department

While manuscripts such as Bibles, certain liturgical books,

and books of hours were widely used for spiritual

purposes in the Middle Ages, there were other texts of a devotional nature that fulfilled specific intellectual and spiritual needs of religious men and women. Books such as psalters and commentaries served this purpose, and both served as teaching tools.

The psalter is the Book of Psalms, and it is often prefaced by a calendar and other auxiliary texts such as canticles, creeds, the litany of the saints, and prayers¹. Psalters often belonged to individuals, who used them for personal meditation and study, but they might also be used for liturgical purposes, and many belonged to priests². In the thirteenth century, the book of hours began to replace the psalter as a book of private devotion. Production and use of psalters continued well into the late Middle Ages and their role as private devotional texts was not entirely usurped by the rise of the book of hours. Some famous examples of psalters used for private devotion include the St. Albans Psalter, produced in the twelfth century for the Anglo-Saxon recluse and mystic Christina of Markyate³; the twelfth-century psalter belonging to Henry of Blois, the bishop of Winchester and known patron of the arts⁴; and the Dagulf Psalter,

which Charlemagne commissioned as a gift for Pope Hadrian, with many pages written in gold or silver⁵. These are but a few of the many well-known extant medieval psalters whose owners are identified.

Quite often King David, composer of the Psalms, appears in the illustrations in these manuscripts, frequently in an inhabited *Beatus* initial⁶. One of the most famous examples of this kind of initial appears in the St. Albans Psalter. David appears inside a large and ornate initial B. He sits on a throne, while a dove, a symbol of David's divine inspiration, hovers above him, and he also holds a book. David often appears in other types of devotional books, especially books of hours. Because he composed the Psalms (prayers originally meant to be sung), David is often depicted singing and playing a harp, as he is in the University of Houston's Flemish book of hours.

Psalters often began with a series of prefatory miniatures, some of which introduce a text, while others stand on their own, having no relationship to the text that follows⁷. The St. Albans Psalter, for example, contains a group of scenes from the life of Christ, which are not accompanied by any related text. Such prefatory cycles reached their most developed form in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the mid-eleventh century⁸.

A variety of texts were also often added to psalters. For example, the romantic Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis* (*Life of St. Alexis*) appears in the St. Albans Psalter, and the Peterborough Psalter is combined with a bestiary. The medieval bestiary was based on a text called the *Physiologus* that was probably written around 200 CE in Alexandria. The word *physiologus* may be translated as someone knowledgeable in Nature. The bestiary, however, even more than the *Physiologus*, included fantastic as well as real animals. Furthermore, its descriptions of animal characteristics and behavior were rendered as moralizing metaphors that taught religious faith and good Christian behavior. The Peterborough Psalter, which dates to the early fourteenth century, was a collaborative production,

with two different identifiable styles found in the manuscripts' Gothic miniatures⁹. The book includes over one hundred moralizing descriptions and images of animals. Like the St. Albans Psalter, the Peterborough book also contains a *Beatus* initial. The initial is historiated, with David playing the psaltery, accompanied by two other musicians and a dog on a detailed decorated background¹⁰. The extensive decoration, like that found in the ornate *Beatus* initial, and the unusual combination of the two books in the Peterborough manuscript suggest that the text was intended for private rather than for monastic use.

In this exhibit, the illustrated Cistercian psalter now in the Houston Public Library represents an example of a traditional psalter and dates from between 1444 and 1445. The book was written by Frater Wilhelmus Kechellerus Hechingen, deacon in the Cistercian monastery of Herrenhalb, near Speyer in Germany. The large colored drawing of the Madonna and Child seated on the ground, an image known as the "Madonna of Humility," has been attributed to the anonymous painter known as "The Master of the Ortenberg Altar," whose most well known work is in Darmstadt¹¹.

The Cistercians were founded in 1120 at the French abbey of Citeaux (Cistercium in Latin), and the order dispersed throughout Western Europe. Their high point of influence was in the twelfth century under the direction of Bernard of Clairvaux. The order also encouraged the formation of chivalric orders such as the infamous Knights Templar, the Knights of Calatrava, and the Knights of St. Lazarus, among others. Cistercian artwork is characterized by an austere Gothic style such as that which characterizes the drawing of the Madonna, with its simple red and blue decoration.

Sometimes the illustrations that appear in a manuscript may provide significant visual information regarding the identities of the book's owner and the patron who commissioned the work. For example, in addition to the text, illustrations in the St. Albans Psalter provide historians and

art historians alike with knowledge about the text's presumed owner, Christina of Markyate. The images also identify the manuscript's patron, Geoffrey de Gorran, abbot of St. Albans. Several of the manuscript's miniatures correspond to events discussed in Christina of Markyate's *vita*, which was composed by an anonymous monk at St. Albans Abbey during her lifetime. The most famous illustration from this manuscript is an initial "C," which shows a nun, presumably Christina, leading a group of monks to Christ. Christina reaches from the earthly sphere and into the heavenly realm to touch Christ. Therefore, she appears as an intercessor on behalf of the monks, likely the monks of St. Albans as this was the abbey with which Christina was closely associated and the abbey whose scriptorium produced the manuscript. The rubric reads, "Spare your monks I beseech you"¹². In her *vita* Christina acts as a conduit to God for Abbot Geoffrey, and he does the same for her. The initial is a visual representation of the spiritual friendship that Christina and Geoffrey shared.

Manuscript commentaries developed out of the tradition of commentaries, or glosses, on important texts made by well-respected churchmen or scholars. Texts might be of a biblical, patristic, or legal nature. Churchmen often wrote notes between the lines or in the margins that commented on, explained, or translated the main text¹³. Eventually, these comments evolved into a kind of text on their own, the *glossa ordinaria*, more simply known as a gloss. Like psalters, these manuscripts were often objects of intense study by monastic men and women. Glosses on Roman law and canon law are particularly well known, and the phenomenon can be connected with the rise of medieval universities. One of the most famous examples is the gloss of Gratian's *Decretum*; however, glosses on particular Biblical passages were also popular.

The fifteenth-century Dutch commentary on the Ten Commandments in the Houston Public Library's collection is an example of such

a manuscript. The style of the border decoration supports a date of approximately 1470-1480. The frontispiece of Moses with the tablets of the law, once thought to be by the Flemish master, Gerard David himself, is now described as "in the manner of David"¹⁴. Moses appears with horns and a gold leaf halo while holding the Ten Commandments, which are written in Dutch on two blue tablets. The border is a characteristically Flemish floral design, similar to that so often found in books of hours dating to the same general time period.

The earliest known artistic representation of the horned Moses first appeared during the eleventh century in England. The image appears in the Aelfric Paraphrase of the Pentateuch and Joshua¹⁵. Scholars have explained this depiction of Moses as having its origin in a problematic interpretation of the original Hebrew word *qeren*. When St. Jerome (ca 340-420 CE) translated the Bible into Latin, instead of describing Moses as descending Mount Sinai with "rays of light" coming from his head, he chose the word "horned" (in Latin, *cornuta*), which is the other meaning of the Hebrew term used¹⁶. In her study, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought*, Ruth Melinkoff argues that Jerome deliberately chose the word "horned" because it was a metaphor in ancient Hebrew signifying that divinity or power had been transferred to Moses through contact with God. In other words, the use of the word *cornuta* in Jerome's translation continued the ancient practice (which, it should be noted, is a universal motif) of using horns as symbols of honor and power, and Melinkoff argues that during Jerome's time this translation would not have seemed strange¹⁷.

Medieval psalters and commentaries are both unique types of books, each serving a dual purpose: as a devotional aid and as a teaching instrument. Furthermore, the illustrations found in manuscripts such as the Houston Public Library's Cistercian psalter and commentary on the Ten Commandments supply the modern scholar with information about the way in which those who produced them viewed these texts as objects of

devotion. The care put into the production of the artwork in these manuscripts was an act of devotion itself.

- 1 Michelle P. Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum in association with the British Library, 1994), 103.
- 2 Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1994), 13.
- 3 Jane Geddes, "The St. Albans Psalter: The abbot and the anchoress," in *Christina of Markyate: A twelfth-century holy woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (New York: Routledge, 2004), 197.
- 4 Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Manuscript* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1979), 26.
- 5 De Hamel, 44-46.
- 6 Brown, 104.
- 7 Brown, 101.
- 8 Brown, 101-102.
- 9 Lucy Freeman Sandler, *The Peterborough Psalter in Brussels and Other Fenland Manuscripts* (London: Harvey Miller, 1974), 1.
- 10 Sandler, 25.
- 11 Seymour de Ricci, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*, vol. 2 (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1961), 2164-2165.
- 12 "Parce tuis queso monachis clementia Jesu."
- 13 Brown, 59.
- 14 de Ricci, 2164.
- 15 Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 13.
- 16 Mellinkoff, 1.
- 17 Mellinkoff, 4-5.